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## THE PRESENTATION OF CLASSICAL PLAYS

### PART III

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Passing on from the discussion of performances and plays we will take up next the practical side of the question, which will appeal to those who have any idea of making an experiment in this line—and I have no doubt that there are some here today who have thought more than once of such an attempt. Choosing the cast is the first problem which meets the amateur stage manager, and it is frequently a hard one, since the success of the play depends to a large extent on the division of rôles among the actors. It is harder when men are cast for feminine rôles, as they are at Wabash; in this case it is not merely a question of dramatic ability but also of face and figure—complexion makes no difference: the “make-up” box will remedy all deficiencies along that line—but it is essential that the actor who plays a feminine part shall have delicate features. This question, however, need not worry the high-school stage managers, as the feminine parts can be taken by the girls of their classes. In picking my cast I begin with the first recitations in the fall term. I must confess that my mind wanders occasionally from the subject under discussion as I consider the possibilities of this or that member of the class for a certain rôle in the coming play. Voice, bearing, reading ability, are all taken into consideration, and the cast is practically chosen by the end of the term. At times it is hard to decide between two individuals and a try-out is held, in which they read lines from the part, or the whole part, if a short one. Since the first year the men have been exceedingly anxious to get into these try-outs, even asking for a chance when it was not offered, and all consider it an honor to make a place. The fact is, quite a number of men take Greek now in order to be in line for positions on the cast, and my experience has been that these are among the best students in the department. If this method does not seem to be suitable, regular try-outs for all places may be held.

The system adopted by our dramatic club has worked very well. Judges are appointed from the members of the town dramatic club; the books of the play are left on the librarian's desk, where all may have an opportunity to look over the parts; on the day of the try-out, selected portions are assigned to the candidates, who come before the judges in pairs and read the dialogue with as much expression as possible, employing such "stage business" as they can work in. This method has proved thoroughly practical, although I prefer the former for my own use, since the results have always been good.

Rehearsals begin at Wabash some four months before commencement, when the play is presented. A Greek tragedy is built around a central figure, who has from a third to a half of the lines. The actor who has the "lead" begins work some time before the rest of the cast. We go over his part two or three times a week, paying attention to the meaning of each line and phrase, and seeking the best method of bringing out this meaning. The lines are read and no special attempt is made to memorize them at first. Entrances, exits, and stage directions of all kinds are noted, while a beginning is made of the use of the hands, not in set gestures, but to aid in the interpretation of the part. "To talk with the hands" is quite an art and it can be mastered only after long practice, but it is very essential. Really, almost as much can be done by the hands, face, and body as by vocal expression. By degrees the others join the rehearsals and the same process is employed in each case. By the end of the winter term the readings have acquired a genuine dramatic flavor. During the spring vacation the parts are committed, an easy task, as most of the men have learned their lines from the frequent readings. Real work is begun outdoors when the term opens. Part of the play is gone over each day, not more than an hour being given to each rehearsal. This outdoor practice is important; at the beginning the voices sound weak and thread-like at a distance of fifty feet, but, by the time commencement comes, every word is distinctly audible a hundred yards away, and that too without apparent effort or straining of the voice. The aim throughout the whole series of rehearsals is to secure as accurate an interpretation as possible of each phrase, line, and scene.

Frequently the members of the cast sit on the ground and we talk over the best means of producing the desired effect. One way is tried and then another until it seems that the best has been found.

Other schools have tried other schemes for rehearsals: In some the cast is turned over to the department of public speaking; in others a professional trainer is employed; in others the actors are divided into groups, each in charge of an instructor. The time given to rehearsals has varied as much as the methods employed in conducting them. Practice for performances in the original has lasted from two months to ten; for plays in translation four or five months has been the limit, while one or two have been staged after only a month's practice, though it does not seem possible that these could have been finished performances. A Greek play has very little "stage business." The effects must be produced by the use of the hands, body, and voice. It will not move the audience, no matter how spectacular it may be, if the tragic spirit is not there, and amateurs cannot get into the tragic atmosphere if they have to make an effort to remember their lines. The mechanics of expression must become a part of the actor's inner consciousness, in order that he may *live* the part when he comes on the stage. A mere mechanical rendition can, undoubtedly, be given after a month's practice, but this short period of training does not give sufficient familiarity with the lines to enable the actor to forget himself and throw his whole soul into his part, to feel the emotions which he must portray.

Chorus rehearsals are held two or three times a week during the last two months, or a little longer in the case of especially difficult music. These are in charge of a musical director and are separate from those of the cast until the last two days, as two full rehearsals of cast and chorus together are enough. We have made no attempt to introduce dancing; there are no girls at Wabash; we do not have a dancing master for the boys; and, besides, the choral music has taken so well that it has not seemed necessary. Plays have been put on in some places without a chorus, in others, as at Clark University, the odes have been declaimed after the fashion set by Reinhardt in his spectacular productions of the *Oedipus* in Germany and England. This saves time, trouble, and expense, but

the performance lacks the lyric touch that the choral music gives. The odes afford a welcome resting place in the tragic action; they beautify and enrich the whole play and, even when conditions are such as to prevent the singing of the choral parts in full, practically the same effect can be obtained by selections from each chorus. Music for several plays is in print and a number of schools have used scores written by their music teachers or by friends of the institutions. A full orchestra is not necessary; the piano is sufficient indoors, but the flute, clarinet, violin, cornet, and harp all add to the effectiveness of the music. We have used different combinations in the orchestra each year and have found the cornet particularly valuable in carrying the air in the open; the piano can be heard but a short distance if there is any breeze stirring, and there is need of a strong lead to keep the singers together.

The costumes are the next important consideration. If the girls will do the dyeing and stenciling, splendid effects can be obtained with a small outlay. A great variety of materials can be employed. The cheapest and, for many uses, the best, is unbleached muslin, which costs about as much as the cheesecloth used in many places and drapes far better. For our first play I dyed a hundred and fifty yards of this stuff with Diamond Dyes in a dishpan on the kitchen stove; the colors were soft and beautiful and the garments looked like fine wool. The same material, when washed and hung up to dry without wringing out the surplus water, takes a fine crapy finish, and, used for undergarments, it affords a pleasing contrast to the smooth folds of the overdrapery. The uncolored muslin does nicely for the undergarments of the chorus, and the chorus overdresses are made in subdued tints in order that they may serve as a foil to the more brilliant colors of the principals. For the better costumes many materials are at hand: cotton crape comes in several good shades and is very effective; poplar cloth, a mixture of wool and cotton, is cheap, drapes in beautiful folds, and is made in a dozen colors; sateen is the best cloth for royal robes and for other robes of the better sort; on the stage it cannot be distinguished from real satin and decorations of gold and silver bring out the sheen of the cloth. Another beautiful stuff is "banzai" silk, which is not real silk but looks like it.

A number of wools of different kinds can also be obtained, but they are much more expensive, unless you do as I have done, turn bargain hunter and watch the "sales" during the fall and winter months. Of these, cashmere and chiffon broadcloth are the best. The latter is especially rich and drapes in long graceful folds, changing with every movement of the wearer. The stencil patterns can be taken from illustrations of Greek vases and Greek architectural details in the manuals of archaeology; the commonest forms are the palmette, the lotus leaf and blossom, and the meander in its different styles. Thin manilla cardboard can be bought at only a fraction of the price of the regular stencil board and is just as good. Artists' tube paints, a brush, and some benzine complete the outfit, and a little practice is all that is necessary to make any one an adept at the art. If decorations of gold and silver are wanted, the same stencils can be used, but greater care is needed as gold and silver paints have a tendency to spread unless the stencil is weighted down. Such decoration pays, however, for it adds a rich finish to wool and sateen that is hard to get in any other way.

The patterns for the various garments are simplicity itself. The "chiton," or undergarment, is a bag, open at both ends, about as long as the height of the wearer. Take two breadths of stuff a yard wide, cut it the proper length, sew up the two seams, hem it, and it is finished, except for decoration. The wearer gets into it, it is fastened on the shoulders with brooches made of large buttons touched with gold paint, the arms are put through the arm-holes that are left after this process is completed, a string is tied around the waist for a belt, and it is bloused up until it clears the floor. The short "chitons" of attendants, shepherds, and other characters of humble life can be made in the same way except for length. They can also be made of a single breadth of cloth long enough to reach from the shoulders to the knees, when doubled. Sew the side seams except for about ten inches at the top, cut a slit across the top eight or ten inches in length, hem the bottom, and finish the neck. The result is a shapely garment with "kimona sleeves" that is very effective, when belted in at the waist. Another variety of undergarment is the "chiton" with overfold. It is made in the same way as the simple "chiton" except for length, which is con-

siderably greater than the height of the wearer. A part is turned over from the shoulders, so as to make a fold front and back. This may be longer in the back, as can be seen in any illustration of the statue of Eirene with the infant Plutos, or the fold may be the same length all around the figure. The usual outergarment is the "himation," or robe. It is a rectangle of cloth five to six feet wide and ten to twelve long. Stencil designs along the ends and the bottom add to its effectiveness and the draping is done after the manner described by Mr. Millet in his article in the first volume of the *Century Magazine*. Mr. Millet was the artist who designed the costumes for the *Oedipus* at Harvard. They were made in his studio and his article is, for stage purposes, the most practical description of Greek costumes and drapings that we have. Travelers wear the "chlamys," or short cloak. It is a smaller rectangle, about two and a half by seven and a half feet, fastened on the right shoulder with a brooch and covering the left arm to the wrist. It can also be arranged so as to leave both arms free. Sandals are made of leather insoles and wool braid. A harness maker's riveting machine will save half the time in manufacturing the footgear.

This all sounds quite simple and, really, it is not a task requiring great skill to manufacture all the costumes necessary for the successful production of a Greek play. For another thing, you can feel sure that your cast will be dressed in a style much more correct archaeologically than it would be if you had hired the outfit from a costumer, since costumers' clothes are not classic. They look pretty, but they are not Greek, while yours will follow Greek patterns very closely, and even in the matter of decoration they will be good Greek, for bits of cloth more than two thousand years old, found by excavators in a Greek tomb, show the same use of painted decoration, the only difference being in the manner of application—stencils were not invented then and the artist was compelled to work "free hand."

We have found that rehearsals for the "mistress of the wardrobe" and her assistants are as necessary as for the cast. Everything must be systematized; one drapes the principals, another the chorus, another the attendants, another does the "make-ups,"

another attends to the wigs, beards, and fillets for the hair. After the costumes are put on, do not expect them to stay in place of themselves. Young America is not given to statuesque attitudes, and the "himatia" will be an endless source of annoyance to the actors and, probably, of amusement to the audience, if they are not fastened firmly in folds which cannot shake loose at the slightest motion of the wearer. It takes safety pins—big ones and lots of them—to prevent a catastrophe. One at the wrist, hidden from sight, takes care of the draped arm; others on the shoulder, carefully placed beneath the folds, are a sure preventive against slipping. Some practice is required before the day of the play, but it pays for all the work when you discover what exquisite effects can be produced with such apparently simple costumes.

The scenery may be as plain or as elaborate as you wish. For the Washington University *Oedipus* and *Antigone* there was no background of any kind except the paneled woodwork of the auditorium: the orchestra circle was laid out on the low platform and the light colors of the costumes showed up well against the dark oak paneling. The *Iphigenia at Aulis* at Smith College was also staged in simple fashion; a grove of pine trees and a hut of boughs sufficed for scenery; the dark green made a splendid background, and the whole production, with its inexpensive scenery and costumes, is enough to encourage those who wish to do something in this line but are afraid of the cost. At Iowa University the expense for scenery was about forty dollars, including material and painting, the latter done by a student. Probably the most inexpensive of all performances, where any scenery was used, was at Antioch. There costumes and scenery together were manufactured at a cost of only thirty dollars. The background was made of cheesecloth and paper held in place by invisible wires. Expenses range from this figure up to that of the real building used in the production of the *Agamemnon* in the Harvard stadium. Outdoor settings have varied as much as those in college auditoriums and theaters. The Tauric *Iphigenia* at Rochester University was played in a beautiful natural theater on the shores of Irondequoit Bay. No scenery was used; the spectators sat on the slopes of a little valley looking out through the trees to the gleaming waters of the bay below,



while the actors entered from behind the hillocks at the end of the natural amphitheater. At the Seattle High School some scenes from the *Menaechmi* were given on the shores of Lake Washington with a natural background of trees. The play was given at twilight and Chinese lanterns furnished the necessary illumination. At Syracuse University the only stage setting used for the *Dido* performance consisted of an altar, a throne, a couch, and a seat or two. The altar and throne were made by a student and covered with white paper, painted to resemble marble. In the *Alcestis* at Syracuse there was a palace door with columns and pediment partly concealed by the fringe of trees and bushes at the back of the open space used for the stage. At the Western College for women the palace was built of lumber covered with marbled paper. All the expense was under twenty-five dollars. The big trees with their dark trunks and green foliage added greatly to the beauty of the setting. At Wabash College regular "flats" are fastened to a framework of two by fours. The color scheme was taken from Baumeister's *Denkmäler des klassischen Altertums*, and the cost was seventy or eighty dollars, including material, labor, and the bill of a professional scene painter. Another "set" was painted for the *Iphigenia among the Taurians* from the restoration of a temple of the most antique Doric order in Durm's *Baukunst der Griechen*. Here the entablature of wooden beams rests on massive stone columns with widely flaring capitals. Such scenery as this serves equally well indoors. All that is needed is a set of stage braces and stage screws and it can be set up in a few minutes in any hall or theater.

Just a word as to the question of giving the plays indoors or in the open air. The latter is always to be preferred if it is feasible, though only a few institutions have attempted outdoor performances. In the first place, it follows the Greek custom, and Greek taste in this, as in other matters, is beyond criticism. As Schlegel says: "To have imprisoned gods and heroes under a roof and in an apartment artificially lighted, would have seemed to the Greeks absolutely absurd." Then, too, there is an atmosphere about the play in the open that cannot be obtained in the theater. In an article on "Open Air Theaters in America" in *Harper's Weekly*,

Mr. Row says: "Volumes might well be written as to the advantages of the outdoor theater. It is an acid test of any play; in it no *untrue* play can live, it is a pitiless revealer." And Eleanor Duse said some years ago: "We should return to the Greeks, play in the open air; the drama dies of stalls and boxes and evening dress and people who have come to digest their dinner." Although this was spoken of modern drama, it applies even better to reproductions from the classic field. The beauty of the performance is heightened, its artistic effect intensified by the natural setting; the green of the trees, the blue of the sky with its fleecy clouds, the rustling of the leaves, the blending of the tints of the costumes on the verdant turf, the moving shadows, and the broken sunlight falling through the branches above add a delightful charm to the whole spectacle. Such a setting has many possibilities. When Alcestis, dying of her own free will to save her husband's life, comes slowly from the palace, her words: "O sun, O light of day, O eddying clouds that fly across the vaulted sky!" are far more impressive than they could be within the walls of a theater; and Antigone's last farewell to the sun and to her native land as she is led away to the vaulted tomb is peculiarly significant from the contrast between the brilliant sunlight and the gloomy chamber in which she is soon to end her life.

However, it is often out of the question to give an outdoor performance, and those who plan to use a school auditorium or theater may feel assured that a rendition there will be most successful. That has been the experience wherever classical drama has been given. The universal verdict of those who have tried it, is that it pays and pays richly in increased interest among both students and friends of the different institutions. In almost every instance the result has also been an increased enrolment in the courses in Greek and Latin. It pays also from the artistic standpoint. Although the actors are amateurs and although their training has usually been directed by their teachers, not by professionals, they have held the attention of their audiences in a remarkable manner. Our experience at Winona Lake in the summer of 1912 is typical. We gave the *Electra* of Sophocles three times, two evening performances and a matinée. A chautauqua audience is a mixed one and is very fickle; if the entertainment does not please, the spectators leave

the auditorium and sometimes there are only a few seats occupied at the end. Our audiences numbered from two to four thousand at each presentation. There was absolute quiet, even on the part of the children, throughout the hour and three quarters the play took, and the whole body, almost without exception, remained to the close. A paragraph from a letter written by one of the spectators to a local paper gives an idea of the deep impression produced on all:

Lifted out of themselves by the beauty and pathos and tragic intensity of Sophocles' drama [says this writer], the audience which filled the auditorium Wednesday evening felt the limitations of twentieth-century thought melting away, and found themselves in sympathetic oneness with primitive passions. Rarely beautiful in its grace of diction and poetic imagery, *Electra* was received with even greater earnestness and attention upon the occasion of its second presentation than at its première on Monday. As for the student cast, their interest in *Electra* is no mere half-hearted affair. They have been untiring in learning the lines which would have overwhelmed less inspired thespians. The task of the chorus in committing the many choral odes to memory is one not to be undertaken lightly, and from the standpoint of labor alone *Electra* deserves foremost rank in the matter of student achievement. Yet this mere mechanical detail of the tragedy, stupendous as it must seem, sinks into insignificance when one considers the wonderful way in which these young students have caught the enthusiasm of their instructor in reproducing the spirit of Greek drama. *Electra's* impassioned lines have a directness and fire amazing to witness, and in his trying task Mr. Aikman shows rare sympathy and understanding. His wan looks and agonizing accents of woe send a subtle thrill through his audience. So thoroughly does he throw himself into the rôle, that he brings fresh beauties to the lines each time he speaks them.

There was scarcely need in the second presentation of the play to request the audience to refrain from applause until the drop of the curtain; a profound silence upon the part of the auditors told how deeply they were impressed with the tragedy, whose grim march toward its tremendous climax carried heart and soul with it. The sincerity which marked the interpretation of all the events that went to make up the tragic situation of *Electra* in her passionate desire for vengeance for the shameful murder of her father, could but call forth equal sincerity of appreciation from the audience. The remarkable performance of these young students can but reflect glory upon their college and lend an impetus to the study of classic drama wherever Greek literature is known.

Such was the effect of a student performance of a Greek tragedy upon one audience. Can we not hope that this will be repeated many times in the future upon many audiences and that by this means many who now think of Greek as a "dead language" may find their ideas decidedly in need of revision?